DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 173 160 HE 011 987

AUTHOR Bok, Derek C.
TITLE Reflections on the Ethical Responsibilities of the University in Society: An Open Letter to the Harvard Community.
INSTITUTION Harvard Univ., Cambridge. Office of the President.
PUB DATE 9 Mar 79
NOTE 5p.; For related documents, see HE 011 985-988; Supplement to the Harvard University "Gazette," March 9, 1979
AVAILABLE FROM Harvard University, Massachusetts Hall, Cambridge, MA 02138

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Freedom; College Administration; *College Role; Conflict; Educational Finance; *Ethical Values; Higher Education; *Institutional Autonomy; Political Influences; Presidents; Private Colleges; Public Relations; *School Community Relationship; School Industry Relationship; Self Determination; Social Attitudes; Standards
IDENTIFIERS *Harvard University MA

ABSTRACT

A discussion of Harvard University's ethical responsibilities by the college's president considers the reasons why universities have traditionally been reluctant to take formal positions on ethical and political issues arising in the outside world. These reasons include a belief that such positions will establish an orthodoxy that may inhibit intellectual freedom; a realization that universities cannot exert economic leverage to affect disputes beyond the campus without inviting outside pressure to influence academic policies; and a concern over the impropriety of diverting university resources away from the academic purposes for which they were entrusted. Universities are designed to achieve particular purposes; their special mission is the discovery and transmission of knowledge. Their institutional goal is not to reform society in specific ways. At the very least, individuals in the university will be offended by the creation of official doctrines that conflict with their personal convictions. Society respects the freedom of academic institutions only because it assumes that they will devote themselves to the academic pursuits for which that freedom was extended. Any loss of university funds can impair the academic enterprise, and ethical choice may involve the course of action that does least harm to legitimate human interests and important social goals involved in the university's mission. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

MASSACHUSETTS HALL
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02138

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Harvard
Lewis

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED179162

Reflections on the Ethical Responsibilities of the University in Society: An Open Letter to the Harvard Community

During the past year, I have received a number of requests that Harvard sever connections on moral grounds with particular individuals, corporations, and even governments. One group has asked the University not to dispense Nestlé products in its dining halls because the company is said to endanger the health of infants by promoting the use of powdered formula in Third World countries. Other groups have urged us to divest all of our stock in companies doing business in South Africa. Still others have argued that we should return a gift and refuse to name a library after a man who made a substantial part of his fortune in South African mining. Finally, a few students petitioned us last December to suspend a contract on the planning of a new university in Iran and issue a declaration that we would not resume work until martial law was lifted and a civilian government installed.

All of these requests raise fundamental issues about the nature of a university and its ethical obligations as an institution. The way in which a university addresses these questions and the answers that it gives are inescapably a part of the moral education it imparts to students. If it refuses to discuss the issues or to explain its decisions, it speaks all too clearly about the degree of importance it attaches to ethical considerations and its willingness to acknowledge moral issues as legitimate subjects for debate. For these reasons, I have decided to publish a series of letters discussing the ethical standards that Harvard should apply in considering the proposals that various groups have advanced for our consideration during the past year. The opinions I will express are not the official views of the University; they do reflect my own efforts to think through and resolve a difficult and important set of problems.

Many students have been disappointed by Harvard's reluctance to take an institutional stand on moral questions that arise in the outside world, especially when those questions involve political issues of grave concern to members of our community. In the pages that follow, I will try to make clear that there are reasons for this reluctance that touch upon the basic purposes of the University. Although these reasons are general in nature, they have a bearing on the specific problems that I will consider in the remaining letters in this series.

Universities are designed to achieve particular purposes. Their special mission is the discovery and transmission of knowledge. In performing these functions, they may receive support from many sources in society. Their members may have a wide variety of relationships with public and private organizations. Their professors may affect many areas of society through teaching and research. Nevertheless, unlike other organizations, such as political parties, environmental associations, or civil rights groups, their *institutional* goal is not to reform society in specific ways. Universities have neither the mandate nor the competence to administer foreign policy, set our social and economic priorities, enforce standards of conduct in the society, or carry out other social functions apart from learning and discovery.

Within their special field of competence, however, universities carry on work of vast significance. The pursuit of knowledge and understanding is itself a process of the greatest value. Research and scholarship help us to explore our past, preserve our culture, and enlarge our comprehension of ourselves and the world around us. They offer us a continuing critique of our values, our behavior, our institutions, and our social practices with benefits that eventually touch the lives and learning of all students at all levels of education and, indeed, of all human beings who seek to broaden their understanding.

The work of universities has great practical significance. In a complex society, higher education plays an indispensable role in preparing doctors, teachers, scien-

tists, lawyers, public servants, and others to carry out the tasks that society requires for its existence. Advances in medical care depend on the work of biologists. Technological progress is often based upon the fundamental research carried on in our laboratories. The growth of the law depends heavily on legal scholarship, while new methods of management emerge increasingly from the work of our business faculties. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any major field of human endeavor that does not rely upon ideas and discoveries that have originated in our academic institutions. Although no one would claim that universities have the capacity to solve the major problems of our society, few of these problems are likely to be solved without the knowledge that universities make possible.

Since universities play such an important role in our society, any policy that threatens their academic functions takes on a significance that transcends the private interests of individual students and faculty members. Although this point may seem obvious, it has not been universally respected. In many countries today, as in the past, individuals within and outside the university try repeatedly to use the institution as an instrument to influence political disputes and affect other controversies in the larger society. These efforts have weakened universities abroad by distracting their members from teaching and learning and by inviting outside interference to control their activities for political ends.

In carrying out their proper functions, universities, such as Harvard, are firmly committed to the belief that individual members of the institution should have every opportunity to develop their convictions and express their views on all intellectual matters, including moral and political questions. All persons should be completely free to form their opinions, communicate them openly, and join with others *as individuals* to work for their adoption. This liberty includes the right to express the most unconventional and unpopular views, even if they offend other members of the university community or arouse the anger of powerful groups in the society.

Intellectual freedom is not a condition that is merely desirable. It is essential to the progress of learning and discovery to which the institution is committed, and any course of action that endangers it must arouse the gravest concern. This is why universities have long been skeptical of proposals that would lead them to establish an official morality by taking institutional positions on ethical and political questions. To be sure, we would not expect anyone at Harvard to penalize individuals disagreeing with positions the University happened to take on moral or political questions. But this is not a policy that can be readily enforced nor can transgressions be easily detected in a world of mixed motives and undisclosed reasons. On a campus where positions are constantly being taken on issues arousing passionate feelings and heated debate, a junior faculty member hoping for tenure, a young administrator seeking a promotion, a full professor worrying about a raise in salary may all feel inhibited, however slightly, from openly espousing a view contrary to the official doctrine of the university. At the very least, individuals in the university will be offended by the creation of official doctrines that conflict with their personal convictions while deeply resenting the implication that an orthodoxy prevails in a community that almost invariably contains a variety of differing views.

These dangers may seem remote, but they are not fanciful on campuses in many other countries of the world, nor have they been unknown in American universities. To avoid such risks, Harvard faculties have often refused to take formal, collective positions even on issues which have provoked nearly unanimous opposition. In the words of the 1971 report of the University Committee on Governance (a committee composed of faculty, students, and alumni representatives): "The case for avoiding corporate acts of this type is overwhelming. . . . An institutional political commitment, especially when carried into active support, imposes an orthodoxy upon individual members of the university community which is prejudicial to the open-minded search for truth."

Proposals to have Harvard sever its connection with other institutions and governments for political or moral reasons often have an objective beyond merely asking the University to make its position clear. They represent an effort to obtain precisely that "institutional political commitment . . . carried into active support" that the Governance Committee rejected so emphatically. By inducing Harvard to break off relations, proponents hope to attract publicity, strengthen an economic boycott, or otherwise bring pressure to bear against those who are thought to be acting immorally. Such objectives give rise to a second concern. For many decades, universities have struggled to be free from pressures exerted by other groups in the society to compromise our academic freedom and intrude upon our right to make our own academic decisions. This protection from outside influence is essential to the integrity of instruction and research. It is the shield

that guards the right of all who teach and learn to express their own convictions however unorthodox or unsettling they may be.

Although the freedom of universities is generally recognized today, the memory of enemies lists, loyalty oaths, and anti-subversive campaigns should remind us that our autonomy will always remain precarious and fragile. If we wish to preserve our independence, we should remember that society respects the freedom of academic institutions only because it assumes that they will devote themselves to the academic pursuits for which that freedom was extended. This does not mean that universities cannot influence events beyond the campus. It does mean that such influence should be exerted only by fostering the reasoned expression of ideas and arguments. Universities that violate this social compact do so at their peril. They cannot expect to remain free of outside interference if they insist on arrogating to themselves the right to use economic leverage to influence the activities of others. As a result, universities that cherish their academic freedom should properly look with suspicion at proposals to participate in boycotts or resort to other forms of economic pressure.

A third reason for the reluctance to sever relationships on moral or political grounds is that such actions will often cost money — whether by refusing gifts, selling stock precipitously, or turning to more costly alternative suppliers. This scarcely means that universities should be free to damage the legitimate interests of others unjustly simply to protect their budgets. But cases of this kind very rarely arise. More often, when students ask Harvard to sever its connections with other institutions, they do so, not because the University has inflicted any tangible harm on others, but because they want the institution to take some affirmative action to help oppressed groups in the larger society. If such actions cost the University money, responsible officials may have strong ethical reasons for refusing to comply. The funds they administer are given in trust for educational purposes and not for political and moral causes, however worthy they may be. That trust is itself a moral responsibility, and officials may abuse it if they make decisions that divert University funds for the benefit of causes external to the institution.

Financial costs are relevant to ethical decisions in yet another way. Universities are not private individuals. The funds they administer are not private funds but represent the indispensable means of carrying out important public functions. These functions themselves have ethical content whether they involve the search for useful knowledge or the ability to offer all deserving students the opportunity to enjoy a Harvard education regardless of their financial means. At a time of financial stringency, any loss of University funds can impair the academic enterprise by diminishing our capacity to provide the scholarships, the salaries, or the opportunities for useful work that enable us to carry out our programs effectively. Such losses may be outweighed by other ethical considerations in a given case, but they are scarcely irrelevant in reaching a decision. If ethical choice involves anything, it involves a conscientious effort to select the course of action that does least harm to legitimate human interests and important social goals. Thus, any loss of university resources deserves consideration because it tends to endanger just such legitimate interests and worthy goals.

If the University is to act in a principled fashion, it must also avoid dealing with moral issues on an ad hoc basis and must try instead to apply its standards consistently. It has an obligation to ascertain all the relevant facts and to offer each party to the dispute an opportunity to state its views. An undertaking of this kind can impose a heavy burden of time and effort on faculty members and administrators, especially if the University must take on the task of assuring itself of the ethical standards of all donors, all suppliers, and all corporations with which it has relationships. In the end, this burden will inevitably fall on the academic work of the institution by diverting time and resources from teaching and research. I am not speaking here of a few hours of meetings added on to a normal day's work but of hundreds and hundreds of hours taken away from regular academic pursuits. I know, for I have watched this happen and observed its consequences in my own life and the lives of many of my colleagues.

Although the reasons I have given help to explain why universities are reluctant to take positions in ethical and political disputes, there are clearly cases where the institution should declare itself. Three examples come to mind.

To begin with, universities must make many collective decisions in order to carry out their regular activities, and these decisions sometimes impinge directly on others in ways that create ethical issues. Experiments on human subjects may involve questions of fairness and informed consent. Decisions to construct new buildings may create issues concerning our responsibilities to surrounding neighbors. The treatment of minority applicants for admission may raise problems of equity and social justice. Thus, universities cannot escape from dealing with moral questions in establishing their normal academic policies and procedures.

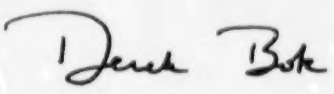
In addition, our endowment leads us to invest in many common stocks. Under existing laws, shareholders are part owners of the companies in which they invest and have an obligation to vote on issues placed before them concerning the management of the concern. As a stockholder, therefore, Harvard has taken positions on a long list of shareholder resolutions raising moral questions, such as whether to continue doing business in South Africa or to disclose political contributions or to refrain from practices that harm the environment.

Finally, Harvard has taken positions on certain political questions and public issues concerning student loans, research policies, and other matters of direct importance to higher education. For example, we decided in 1977 to join three other universities in preparing an *amici curiae* brief in the *Bakke* case to persuade the Supreme Court not to issue a ruling that would prohibit admissions officers from taking account of minority status in the admissions process. Although the issue was political in nature and a matter of some controversy within the University, Harvard intervened because the case involved an important issue bearing directly upon the established academic policies of the institution. As a university, we had a special competence to speak to the problem under consideration. And by presenting our arguments, we contributed through established channels to the reasoned debate that is essential to the decision-making process in a democracy.

The cases just described are quite different from the recent proposals asking us to sever relations with outside parties. The actions these proposals recommend do not flow from any traditional obligation, such as the duty of shareholders to vote their stock or of universities to treat their students fairly. Instead, they involve new responsibilities urged upon the institution. These responsibilities do not arise from issues that directly concern our academic policies and programs but have to do with such matters as the tragedy of apartheid, the health of infants in the Third World, and the threat to democratic values in Iran. These differences do not necessarily mean that Harvard should not agree to act; they do suggest that the proposals now being pressed upon us cannot be supported by established practice but must be justified on separate grounds. In the letters to follow, I will discuss the arguments advanced to provide such justification, taking full account of all the reasons that have cautioned us in the past against acting as an institution to engage in social and political controversies.

To many people concerned with suffering and injustice, these reasons may seem insignificant. What are fears about orthodoxy and academic freedom, what are the costs and burdens of deliberation compared with the injuries of those who are oppressed and exploited? Despite its emotional appeal, I do not believe that this question offers an accurate description of the choices that actually confront us. Injustice and suffering are plainly matters of grave concern. We may justly feel impelled to give our time and effort as individuals to the struggle against these evils. We may also expect the University not to act deliberately to increase the sufferings of others. But the principal issue before us is whether we should go further and use the University as a means of expressing moral disapproval or as a weapon in our fight against injustice even if we threaten to injure the academic functions of the institution.

In pondering this question, we should remember that our academic programs have great social value, although their fruits are often intangible and long-term in nature. Before we jeopardize these programs, we should also recognize that very rarely will the institutional acts of a single university — or even universities as a group — have any substantial possibility of putting an end to the misfortunes that exist in society. Individual scholars will occasionally have an influence through the persuasive power of their knowledge and ideas. The name of Harvard may succeed in attracting public attention, if only briefly. But we should not confuse the power to obtain publicity with the power to determine events. Neither as stockholders nor as purchasers nor as contractors of services do universities possess sufficient leverage to move large corporations, let alone entire governments. One may still ask that the University take account of injuries elsewhere in the world, even if its acts are only symbolic. Nevertheless, there comes a point where symbolism must give way to real threats to academic freedom, real financial losses, and real administrative burdens. If we do not acknowledge this point, we will merley succeed in damaging important functions of the University without doing anything to alleviate the sufferings of others. In seeking to improve the human condition, we may end by only making it worse.



Derek C. Bok

Supplement to the Harvard University *Gazette*, March 9, 1979.